

Illegal 'Taps'

A Report on CIA And Copied Mail

San Diego

A man who identified himself as a former operative of the Central Intelligence Agency said yesterday that when he resigned in 1959 the Post Office Department was covertly assisting the CIA in intercepting and copying the mail of U.S. citizens.

Melvin Crain, 53, a professor of political science at San Diego State University, said CIA officials involved in the "mail tapping" acknowledged to him that it was an illegal and unconstitutional invasion of the National Security Act of 1947, which created the intelligence agency.

He said his colleagues justified the operation, however, as being necessary to "achieve our mission" of safeguarding American security against the Soviet Union.

A spokesman for the Postal Service in Washington, Jamison Cain, defied that the service "has ever or is now" involved in opening the private mail of American citizens.

The Post Office's alleged screening of letters written by Americans, mostly to relatives or friends in the Soviet Union, was said to have started in the summer of 1953 during the second term of the Eisenhower Administration.

According to Crain's account, the post office department set up areas in post offices in New York City and New Orleans, staffed by special cleared personnel, where special equipment was used to open, copy and re-seal letters from Americans about whom the CIA sought information.

"The surreptitious opening of U.S. mail was the last straw for me," said Crain, who resigned from the CIA in June 1959, seven months

after he said he first learned of the mail surveillance carried out in extraordinary secrecy under an arrangement among the CIA, the post office department and the FBI.

A CIA spokesman in Washington declined to comment on whether Crain ever worked for the agency or on whether such mail opening was carried out.

Crain, who said he joined the CIA in September, 1951, said the agency gave him a "Staff 1" clearance — a hypersensitive security clearance — in November, 1953, that made him aware of the highly secret mail interceptions. Thereafter, he said his office read about six intercepted letters from Americans each day.

Most of the letters were in English, to friends and relatives in the Soviet Union, Crain said.

Crain said he had carried his complaint to his superior, Richard Bissell, deputy director of the CIA's office of plans, "who said he was surprised and shocked and would take steps to end the mail surveillance, but nothing happened."

Crain said that in May, 1954, he went outside the agency and consulted Dean Acheson, then in private law practice in Washington after serving as secretary of State in the Truman administration.

He went to Acheson, he said, because he believed Acheson had extensive influence with members of the Eisenhower administration.

"But Acheson seemed disinterested and impatient during our interview. He said he would make a few phone calls to see what could be done. But he never got in touch with me and I never tried to see him again."